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ABSTRACT

The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health created the School of the Future (SoF) project to enable selected Texas schools to coordinate and implement school-based social and health services on their campuses and to demonstrate the effectiveness of this method of service delivery by evaluating the project. This booklet focuses on the Parent Volunteer program implemented in the SoF site in San Antonio. The program provides an example of how one community is making a difference for its children and families. Parents were invited to help in the schools, and the Parent Volunteer program soon developed components of volunteer work in the schools, parent education, and fun. Training, which was essential to the program's success, began with the recognition that many of the parents lacked self-esteem. As a result, confidence building was an important element in parent training. The program has flourished. In the first year, volunteers gave 800 hours of service. By the fourth year, volunteer service was beginning to level off at almost 8,000 hours of service a year. Teachers and parents agree that the children like having their parents in school. It has not yet been established that there is a positive effect on academic achievement, but it does seem that children whose parents volunteer do take more advantage of the school's services. Parent volunteers are learning and demonstrating that they can work within the school for positive change. (SLD)

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PARENT VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

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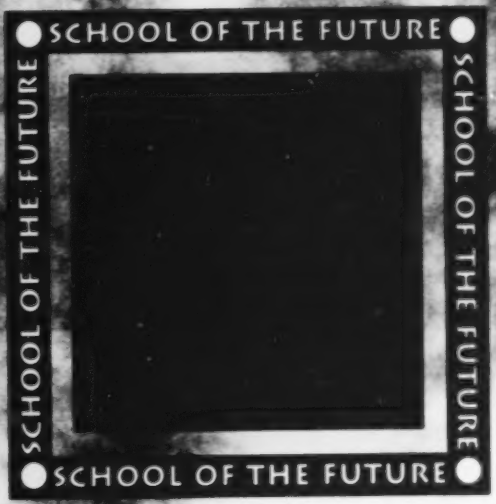

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PARENT VOLUNTEER PROGRAM • SAN ANTONIO

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PREFACE

Children face a number of disadvantages in the neighborhood in which our School of the Future project is located—poverty, overcrowded housing, low employment, high drug use, and virtually all the other problems associated with low-income inner-city families. But over the years we have had one thing going for us—a small group of parents who were actively concerned about their children's education.

When we began the School of the Future project, we used that small group as the core for starting a parent volunteer program. We knew that our parents cared about their children and wanted the best for them, but we also knew that many of them spoke little English, had completed only a few years of formal education, and were hesitant to come to the schools unless they were called for a problem or an emergency. We wanted to change that, and we saw increased parent involvement as the key element for developing our school-based services.

The Parent Volunteer Program was the one area of program development that far exceeded our first-year expectations. From the beginning, more parents participated than we had expected, and they contributed far more time to the school than we had even considered. It took some time to teach the parents how to help out in the classroom, and it also took time to convince the teachers that these parents could be useful to them. But as the parents increased their skills and their self-confidence, all kinds of good things began to happen.

Because the Parent Volunteer Program has played such a key role in the building of our school-based services, and because it has become such an integral part of J.T. Brackenridge Elementary School, it seems a fitting example of how one community is making a difference for its children and their families through the School of the Future. ~

ROD RADLE
Coordinator
School of the Future Project, San Antonio

INTRODUCTION

In Summer 1990, the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health created the School of the Future. Like a number of programs, this innovative project is designed to enhance the lives of children in poverty and their families, in this case by providing an integrated array of health and human services that use the schools as the centers for service delivery. Unlike most programs, however, it has an extensive, longitudinal evaluation component built in to document the project's process and outcome to provide the accountability necessary for determining the most effective methods of helping young Texans.

Four years of this five-year project have been completed. In these years, each site has integrated a number of different programs on its campuses to meet the particular needs of its community. Although it is too early to determine the long-range benefits of these projects, it is not too early to describe some of the key programs at each site and show the impact they are having in the development of the School of the Future as well as on the children and families they serve.

That is the purpose of this report. It is the first in a four-part series that will highlight a key program at each of the project sites—Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. The programs described were selected by the coordinator at each site for their unique aspects as well as the crucial roles they have played in the development of the School of the Future in the given community.

This first report focuses on San Antonio and its Parent Volunteer Program, which exemplifies parent involvement at its best. It describes how, in a few short years, the program was developed at J.T. Brackenridge Elementary School, how it became the cornerstone of the project in San Antonio, and how it is having an impact on the participating families, their children, and the school itself. The report also touches upon some of the other service programs based in the San Antonio project schools and the partnerships that have been developed with agencies and organizations throughout the community.

Hogg Foundation funding for the School of the Future project will conclude in the summer of 1995. By that time it is more than likely that one or more of the sites will have incorporated the project into an existing school or community system. It is also likely that, whatever the disposition of the School of the Future in San Antonio, the Parent Volunteer Program will become a standard feature of J. T. Brackenridge Elementary School because of its importance to the school and the families it serves.

Wayne H. Holtzman
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wo large, brightly colored murals cover the walls of the front hallway at J.T. Brackenridge Elementary School in San Antonio. One, "Dreams for Tomorrow," was created by the students to show their hopes for the future. The other, "J.T. Parents' Dreams," was illustrated by the parents to depict their wishes and dreams for their children.

But the parents at J.T., as the school is known, are doing more than hoping and dreaming. Through the School of the Future's Parent Volunteer Program, they are doing their part to make their dreams and those of their children come true.

J. T. Brackenridge is one of three schools that comprise San Antonio's School of the Future project (SoF), a pilot program of school-based services that was started in 1990 in four cities—Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio—by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health in an effort to help turn around some of the negative statistics of schools and the communities. Five essential features characterize each of these SoF sites:

- *The integration of a broad spectrum of health and human services in or near public schools.*
- *Involvement of parents and teachers in the program activities.*
- *Involvement of many organizations, both public and private, as partners.*
- *A strong commitment to the project by superintendents, principals, and other school administrators.*
- *A willingness to participate in the evaluation of the project.*

The need for these features was substantiated by a study of neighborhood needs which the San Antonio SoF conducted as its first project. Recognizing that the schools' educational efforts were being hindered by the multitude of social and health problems among students and their families, the site set five goals to improve student learning and mental health:

- *Develop a school climate conducive to education and personal enhancement.*
- *Provide supportive parenting education programs for parents.*
- *Coordinate social service programs from surrounding agencies for the school's families and, when feasible, locate them at the school.*
- *Develop a parent volunteer program to assist the school and to provide job training for parents.*
- *Develop the financial resources to enhance the mental stability of students and their familes.*

Through the School of the Future, a number of programs were coordinated in the pilot site schools—J.T. Brackenridge and De Zavala Elementary Schools and Tafolla Middle School—to meet these goals. They included family, group, and individual therapy provided by graduate student interns in Marriage and Family Therapy at St. Mary's University under the direction of the project coordinator and a full-time social worker; crisis intervention, parenting education, and counseling by social work interns from Our Lady of the Lake University; Children's Creative Response to Conflict, a method of conflict resolution that is reinforced in the classrooms; and mentoring and sponsored field trips by local businesses and churches. They also included after-school and summer recreation activities and other

programs to help youngsters have a positive academic experience. Two of the goals, however, were directed specifically toward parents. Neither in itself was unusual. Involving parents in their children's education received national attention in the 1960s, when the federal government mandated Head Start to teach parents how to help their children learn, use them as paraprofessionals in preschool settings, and place them on planning and advisory boards. Since that time, parent involvement has gained increasing favor and credibility, with several studies attesting to its impact on improving children's academic skills and knowledge.[1]

Furthermore, there is nothing new about having parents participate to some degree in their children's schools. Traditionally, mothers have attended PTA meetings, accompanied classes on field trips, and sponsored carnivals and other festive events. But this type of participation has had a very limited tradition at J.T. Brackenridge. A different and more typical tradition existed. It was for parents to avoid coming to the school unless they were called in because one of their children was in trouble.

J.T. Brackenridge serves more than 950 youngsters from the neighboring Alazán-Apache Courts, the oldest public housing project in the country. The neighborhood is predominantly Hispanic, overcrowded, and poor, with an average annual family income of just under $5,000. Unemployment is high; poverty, crime, and substance abuse are common. Few of the parents completed high school or developed marketable employment skills; many are very young, lack positive parenting skills, and are limited in their ability to encourage or enhance their children's educational development.

The one positive note is that the population is relatively stable. Though the projects were built more than 50 years ago as transition housing, with residents expected to improve their economic status and move on within one or two years, the reality is that families continue to live there from one generation to the next.

Thus, while parent involvement in schools is not in itself unusual, its

development at J. T. Brackenridge, where it had been virtually nonexistent, is unusual indeed. How parents from "the projects" have come to play a positive role in the school and in the education of their children is a special feature of the San Antonio School of the Future.

Developing the Program

The first parents to participate were among those who had taken part in the neighborhood survey of needs the previous year. Because they had indicated at that time that they would be interested in becoming involved in their children's school, the School of the Future coordinator invited them to attend the Parent Volunteer Program's initial meeting. There to welcome them were the school principal, school counselor, SoF project coordinator, and volunteer program director. Each helped overcome the parents' lingering fear of the school and potential discomfort over their limited education by assuring them that they could be of real help to the teachers and staff. The administrators confirmed their welcome by offering to designate one room in the school that would be solely for the volunteers to use whenever they were on campus. The parents liked what they heard and they spread the word. Eight parents attended the first meeting; 15, including two fathers, attended the second.

This high rate of participation for a new program can be credited in large part to the volunteer program director. Not only was she a former teacher at J.T., but she also has served for many years as co-director of Inner City Development Corporation, a local community service organization for youth and families. In this position she had met and worked with a number of J.T. parents, and from this group she was able to recruit some participants for the program. Furthermore, she understood their needs.

Though she realized that considerable guidance was called for, the

director determined from the beginning that this was to be the parents' program to the fullest extent possible. She viewed her role as a coordinator and facilitator more than solely as a director. Rather than make plans for the volunteers, she asked them what they wanted to do, eliciting their ideas and expectations for what they might accomplish. Then she stood behind them, guiding and encouraging them and helping them carry out their ideas.

The group met weekly for the first two months to discuss their concerns and interests. Several of these parents had grown up in the housing projects, others had lived there all of their adult lives, and their concerns for the most part reflected their lack of ease in a school setting: How should you behave in a school? How should you dress? How should you act if your child is in the class where you are helping? What should you do if you don't like something that a teacher does? By the end of those first months, the program director had helped them answer some of these questions as well as develop a list of activities in which they would feel comfortable participating.

As the parent volunteer group evolved, it developed three components: volunteer work in the school, parent education, and—perhaps most surprising to the participants—fun. Training, it turned out, was essential in all three categories.

Training has been crucial to the program's success. Recognizing that many of the volunteers lacked self-esteem as well as skills, the program director devoted the first year's training sessions to confidence-building in order to enable the women to develop enough self-confidence to assist in a classroom or office, whatever the tasks involved. She conducted many meetings that year, weekly at first, then every other week. Meetings focused on communication with school personnel and students, basic job requirements such as signing in and dressing appropriately, and how to resolve problems as they arise.

The following year, an additional training session was held for volunteers whose children were moving on to middle school so that the parents could move on, as well. This was—and remains—a good

idea, but in reality few parents spend time as volunteers once their children graduate from elementary school.

Both lectures and participatory exercises are used in parent training, with participation proving the most effective. At first the director conducted most of the training herself, but as the program evolved, she brought in an increasing number of professionals to work with the volunteers. A major resource has been the City of San Antonio's Children's Resources Division, which provides workshops on a variety of parenting issues at no cost to nonprofit groups.

Beyond training, volunteers needed to have teachers and staff willing to accept them. Thus, early in the program, the director sent notes to all of the teachers explaining the program and asking if they would be willing to have parents assist them in the classroom. If they indicated they were interested, they were asked to complete a request form to specify what days and hours they would like help and what kinds of tasks they would like the parents to do.

Most of the requests were for help in preparing visual teaching materials: laminating pictures, designing bulletin boards, cutting out numbers and letters, drawing or coloring pictures, making copies, and other arts and crafts. Some requests were more specific. A fourth-grade teacher, for example, requested a volunteer from 8:15 to 8:55 every morning except Thursdays to give special attention to two learning-disabled students who needed to have someone listen to them read. Other requests were for assisting with supervision in the cafeteria and at recess and serving as a liaison for teachers who do not speak Spanish.

Prior to the start of school that first year, the director provided one day of teacher orientation to the Parent Volunteer Program. It became apparent, however, that additional training was required, so a two-hour session was held during the school year. Now an annual orientation is conducted informally at faculty meetings. It consists primarily of two things: (1) informing the teachers of the types of assistance available and (2) asking the teachers for their patience.

The parent volunteers for the most part have had no experience working in a school or office setting, and often they need more guidance in carrying out tasks than teachers generally realize. Patience is required by all faculty and staff who use parent volunteers at J.T.

Parents, in turn, were surveyed to learn their education level, artistic talent, and reading ability as well as what grades they would like to work with and whether they would prefer helping in a classroom or in some other area. Questions were worded simply and in a nonthreatening way. Among them: "Do you like to draw pictures and make posters?" "Can you help put books on a shelf in alphabetical order?" "Would you enjoy supervising children in the cafeteria?" "Would you feel comfortable working in the school clinic?" They were also asked how many grades of school they had completed and what days and hours they would be available to help in the school. In this way, parents could be assigned to teachers or staff with the prospect of a good match, which was essential for the potential success of the program.

At the same time that the volunteer aspect of the program was being developed, the director initiated the education sessions. The first couple of meetings took place at night, based on the assumption that it would be the most convenient time for parents who were in the work force or had young children. It became apparent almost immediately, however, that for a variety of reasons the parents found evenings inconvenient. The group ultimately settled on Thursdays at 10 a.m. for meetings, which excluded parents who were employed in the mornings but was the best time for the majority who had expressed an interest in participating. Two meetings were held per month: one, work sessions on problems, planning, and how to attract more parents to the program; the other, parent education lectures or workshops on topics selected by the parents. This time schedule worked well, and it has been followed throughout the course of the program.

When the director first asked group members what they would like to do for fun, "They were stumped," she said. "They'd never

thought about having fun." As she pointed out, most of these women had had children when they were very young, and in a sense "they had never been teenagers." They quickly made up for lost time. Their first outing was to an all-you-can-eat pizza restaurant, and "once they got into the swing of it, they had no problem figuring out something fun to do, from Halloween parties to trips to the state park." Now they have no difficulty planning outings, sometimes doing things that include their children, such as driving around to see the Christmas lights or going swimming, but also giving baby showers and having other events just for themselves.

Group identity was another area to be developed. The first year, the participants decided that each would make an apron, a useful item and one that would identify those who wore them as members of the volunteer group. The second year, they got T-shirts with "Parent Volunteer - J.T. Brackenridge" printed on them along with a picture of an eagle, the school's symbol. In the program's third year, an outside organization donated laminated name tags with the volunteers' pictures on them, identification symbols which the group particularly liked because of their professional appearance.

To help the volunteers feel at home in an unaccustomed setting, the school from the beginning gave them a space to call their own. There, in a large room just down the hall from the SoF coordinator's office, parents can meet at any time throughout the school day. There is a blackboard on one wall, several work tables and chairs, a coffee pot, a few books, and a window that overlooks the school yard. One wall features a colorful monthly birthday calendar that the volunteers created for their group; next to it, a folder for teachers' work requests indicates that fun and work go hand in hand.

Preschoolers are welcome when their parents work at the school, and often volunteers bring their infants and toddlers with them. They can stay in the volunteer room with their parents or in a child care room provided by the School of the Future specifically for parents while they are on volunteer duty or attending meetings or education sessions. In the beginning, the program tried to have cooperative

baby-sitting in which each volunteer parent would take a turn looking after the children. When this plan proved unsatisfactory—the mothers didn't come that regularly and when they did, it was not to baby-sit but to volunteer in the school—a sitter was hired to come five mornings and two afternoons a week, a more reliable arrangement and one in which as many as six youngsters can be well-cared-for at any given time.

A PARENT VOLUNTEER MEETING

A look into the Parent Volunteer room in time for a monthly work meeting would give an example of what takes place.

It is 10 o'clock Thursday morning in late summer, and the first meeting of the semester is about to begin. As the parents arrive, they visit with one another—some in English, some in Spanish, some in a comfortable mix of both languages. A few sit around a work table, cutting geometric shapes out of colored paper or trimming laminated posters. A couple of teenagers, working as junior volunteers while their high school is still on vacation, enter the room, talking animatedly to one another. A preschooler runs in, his mother a few steps behind; a man follows and, looking neither to left nor right, strides across the floor to an empty chair. Other women arrive, singly and in pairs; the SoF project secretary takes a seat, paper and pencil in hand. Just before meeting time Patti Radle, the program director, joins the group, which now numbers about 20, and a few minutes later Rod Radle, the SoF coordinator, comes in bearing a tray of sweet rolls which he hands to one of the women to pass around the room. (The two leaders, husband and wife, have been active in the community for many years. They are known, liked, and respected by community residents, and they are called by their first names by all who work with them, whether paid staff or volunteers.)

Before the meeting can begin, Rod, still standing near the door, says he has an announcement to make concerning the busses for

Saturday's football game. (He had been given 250 tickets to a professional game, and the first people to be invited had been the parent volunteers and their families, many of whom had never attended such an event. Teachers and staff and their families completed the list of invitees.) He explains how everyone who is going to the game is to meet at an appointed hour at the school, where busses rented from the SAISD would be waiting to take them to and from the big event. After some last-minute details are worked out, Rod excuses himself and leaves the room, and the meeting begins.

Patti, the program director, opens the meeting with introductions. Most of the participants have worked together for some time and know one another well, but it is the beginning of the semester and there are a couple of new volunteers. "Tell us your name," she requests, "then tell us two things that you want your kids to learn." A skilled facilitator, she uses this ploy as both an icebreaker and an opportunity to help the parents develop their communication skills. As the parents introduce themselves, many state how long they have been volunteering with the program, which seems to be a source of pride as well as identity. Their values became evident as they express their wishes for their children. Two themes predominate: They want their children to respect themselves and others and to get an education. "I dropped out in the ninth grade," says one, "and I want my daughter to do better." Other wishes also reflect their values—to be honest, respectful, honorable, responsible. When their turns come, the two teenagers speak about their plans not only to complete high school but also to go on to college. "I want to be an elementary school teacher," says one, motivated by her summer experience.

The parents also want to learn. After Patti announces that there will be an orientation session for new volunteers, the discussion turns to potential topics for the education meetings scheduled for the rest of the year. Two popular subjects include "getting along with your children" and "how to grow as parents," both of which reflect frequent parental concerns.

But volunteering is the reason these mothers—and one father—are here, and as they report on the variety of tasks that they handled the previous semester, it becomes apparent that they are, indeed, helping the school. They help in the classroom, cafeteria, clinic, parent room, and administrative offices. They read to the children and listen to them read; they answer phones, make copies, and design posters. One woman spends all her time in the parent room, where she serves as unofficial greeter for volunteers as well as works on visual materials for the teachers. Some volunteers work for the same teacher all year; others go where they are needed on a given day. For many, volunteering takes on aspects of paid employment—they come daily and spend the entire morning, afternoon, or even the full day working in the school. Of those who have obtained jobs in the work force since they first volunteered, several still manage to put in a few hours at the school whenever their schedules permit.

Meetings provide a chance for the parents to raise questions or discuss problems about their work. The group listens attentively as the director tells them that a teacher has complained about one of the volunteers, saying that the parent interrupts her class by coming in frequently to see if she wants any help. The fact that the volunteer had a child in this teacher's class the previous semester makes this a touchy subject. Under the director's guidance, several parents, without mentioning names or being critical, discuss how this problem might be handled. Finally, as a group, they agree on two options: the volunteer might check with the teacher early in the morning or during conference time rather than during class time, or she and the teacher might agree upon a specified schedule in which the parent could come to class once or twice a week to see if the teacher would like help. Patti agrees to make these suggestions to the volunteer and to follow up to make sure that the issue is resolved.

Group members also talk about name tags. Since they must wear them in the school for identification, they agree that they would like professional ones "with our pictures on them, like those we got one year through the Ident-A-Kid program." Gloria, the project secretary, has been with the program only a short time and admits she is

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ONE PARENT'S STORY

The first day Lupe brought her little girl to kindergarten, she wondered what "all those parents" were doing in the school. Once her daughter was settled in class, she got up her nerve and asked a couple of women why they were there.

"They told me they were parent volunteers," she said. "They said they helped out in the school and that all you had to do was go to room 121 and tell them you wanted to be a volunteer. So I did, and they said I could be one, too." Lupe smiled and added, "I'm starting my fifth year now. I like it a lot."

At first Lupe helped out a couple of mornings a week. With two teenage boys as well as a younger daughter in preschool and a baby boy at home, she felt that was all the time she could give. But when her youngest entered preschool, she started coming to J.T. daily.

At first she worked only in the volunteers' room helping make posters. She was comfortable with the other parents but hesitant to go into a classroom. Born in Mexico, she had moved to San Antonio after she married, and her English was limited. Art, however, required no language, and she found she had a talent for it. Soon she began to get praise for her art work, and one of the kindergarten teachers started asking her to help design some bulletin boards and special displays. As her confidence grew, so did her ability to speak English. As a result, Lupe—and her children—have blossomed.

Lupe is quick to acknowledge what a difference it makes when a parent participates in her children's schooling. She remembers

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what it was like with her older boys, one now in tenth grade, the other a school dropout. When they were little, "If I talked to their teachers twice a year, that was a lot. They didn't want you in the school unless something was wrong." Being a volunteer has helped her get to know and get along with her children's teachers. Now she and the teachers "work on things together" before problems arise, talking over such things as how to keep her youngest daughter from talking too much in class, for example, or how to help her older girl with math.

Her daughters like seeing their mom at school. When they see her in the halls they wave or say hi, and at lunch time they sometimes run by the volunteer room for a quick visit. And both are doing well in school. One is in the gifted and talented program, the other in the choir, and they are well-liked by teachers and children alike. Lupe thinks one reason her girls do well is because, by spending time in their school, "I show them that I care."

On the other hand, she has learned that if one of her children has a problem, help is available. Recently, at the teacher's suggestion, she made an appointment to see a counselor about her youngest child, who is now in kindergarten. "He's always busy," says his mother. "He pushes and hits his sisters and gets into fights." He also disrupts the class, according to the teacher, who recognized that the problem went beyond little-boy exuberance and referred Lupe to the School of the Future's counseling program. A counselor will conduct a diagnostic assessment of the child, then develop a plan to provide appropriate services such as individual therapy or family counseling. With this early intervention, the chances for improving the little boy's behavior and, in turn, his potential for academic success, are greatly enhanced.

Lupe herself has benefitted from serving as a volunteer. "I never talked English before," she says. "I learn it here. And

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I'm reading a little English now. I learn more and more." Through the adult education classes held at the school, she was able to earn a GED and now is studying to become a secretary. With her improved English, she now helps out in the classroom as well as makes posters and other learning materials. When she works elsewhere, "the teachers say to me that they miss me a lot."

She takes pride in her work and in the respect and praise that she receives for it. In addition to her volunteer work, she also serves as a crossing guard on "the Mama Patrol" before and after school and works in the cafeteria at lunch time. "At the school I have no problems," she says. "Everybody knows me. My kids like my being there. Other kids like it, too. They tell me, 'You're a good mom,' and they give me a hug. I like the kids," she adds.

Lupe wants her children to finish high school. "It's hard," she tells them, "but you need to finish." As a parent volunteer and 'good mom,' she is setting a fine example.

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not familiar with how the previous name tags were obtained, but she says that she will be happy to look into the possibility of getting the same or similar name tags for those who don't already have them.

It is just past 11 a.m. All the current business has been discussed, and the hour has passed quickly. The lone male volunteer leaves immediately, the women more slowly as they visit for a few minutes longer. A couple of mothers have brought their lunches, and they stay in the room to eat and talk—and perhaps have a quick visit from their children—before returning to the work table to color and cut and trim more instructional materials for the teachers.

THE VOLUNTEERS

Who are these parents who are making the phrase "parent involvement" a reality at J.T. Brackenridge? The fact that they are parents of elementary school children gives them a lot in common. So does the fact that they all live in the "projects," the Alazán-Apache Courts that cover several blocks across the street from the school. Most are Mexican-American women, all speak Spanish, and all want their children to fare better than they have in their lives. Beyond those basic facts, however, they are individuals who have the hopes and wishes, worries and fears, strengths and weaknesses of parents of young children everywhere. For some, being a volunteer has become tantamount to a new career.

- Mary Alice, a mother of four, dropped out of school in the ninth grade but is doing her best to see that her youngsters complete their schooling. "Kids do better when their parents are here, at the school," she says. "If you stay late, they can stay here, too. They learn from me; I learn from them." Mary Alice helps with computers, and "I love it," she says of her work. She also enjoys the group activities—going to the movies, to parties, and on trips to the park. "We talk about our problems," she adds, indicating that

in addition to its other values, the group serves as a source of social and emotional support.

- Juanita, an early school dropout, is now working on her General Educational Development degree (GED) through classes taught at J.T. and hopes in time to become a teacher. She first became a volunteer a year ago when her daughter started kindergarten. She had had some day care experience and finds it useful in her work at the school, where she enjoys helping the younger children with their assignments as well as drawing and making posters.

- Manuela was born in Mexico and had completed secondary school before she moved to San Antonio about 10 years ago. There, limited English and lack of confidence kept her from continuing her own schooling, but they didn't stop her from helping further her children's education. Manuela is at J.T. virtually full time. Teachers in the kindergarten and first-grade classes have come to rely on her to help with a wide variety of tasks ranging from copying and laminating materials to chaperoning on field trips. She takes comfort in the fact that while she is carrying out her assignments, her preschooler benefits from the child care provided at the school or stays in the volunteer room with her during the hours when child care is not available.

- Pearl, a volunteer since the project began, was seriously injured last year in a drive-by shooting, but she hasn't let that or subsequent time in a wheel chair and on crutches deter her from filling her special role: welcoming the other volunteers to J.T. Brackenridge. "I'm here instead of being home watching TV and wasting electricity," she says with a laugh. "It's good for the kids. I make sure my little girl sees me. She behaves better. She's in third grade now and is in the gifted and talented program." As to the volunteer group, "We have good parties. Everyone pitches in. We get along pretty well. We have a good time."

For others, the volunteer program has become a major step toward returning to school or obtaining paid employment. It is not uncom-

mon, however, for these parents who are working or in school to continue devoting as much time to J.T. as their schedules will allow.

- Rosemary has four children and is employed daily from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m.; Maria, after volunteering for a year-and-a-half, now works five days a week as head of housekeepers at a local motel; Yolanda is a substitute teacher with the San Antonio ISD. Each became employed after gaining the confidence and skills needed for obtaining and keeping a job through the parent education sessions and her work as a volunteer. And each continues to help at the school. Maria comes in twice a week to hand out sports equipment and help grade tests for the coach; the others volunteer as time permits because they "consider it so important."

- Teresa considers the parent volunteer group "a lifesaver." Her little boy is now in third grade, but "he's an only child, and I cried when he started school." When she was asked to volunteer at the school, she "accepted eagerly." Now she is continuing her own education, attending St. Phillips College where she is studying to become "an occupational therapist, or maybe a social worker." She also serves as PTA president at J.T., but these activities don't prevent her from continuing her volunteer work, helping the same teacher she has worked with throughout her four years in the program.

- Everton is one of the two men volunteering this academic year. (There have been a few others, but they didn't stay with the program, probably, according to Coordinator Rod Radle, because "it's a cultural thing. We need to make men feel more accepted.") Everton, who works afternoons and evenings in a mortuary, jokes that he volunteers because "I like to be around live people." In reality, he started volunteering because he has a stepson at J.T. and "I already knew Rod. I'm doing this out of goodness, not welfare," he is quick to point out.

For many of the parents, being a volunteer is a learning experience as well as an activity that helps others. One, for example, assisted in the office at first; then, as she gained confidence and got to know the

children and teachers, she began helping in classrooms. Said another, "I'm not a perfect reader. I can listen in class and learn." And, "I don't mind being in charge if I know I can do the work." As to the program as a whole, "I wish that they had this in other schools. We're not getting paid for working, but everyone who gets government assistance should have to do this. You can have problems anyplace."

In a few short years the regular volunteers have developed into a cohesive group. Though they are all from the Alazán-Apache Courts, they are from different sections, and most had not known one another previously. Through Parent Volunteers, some have become true friends, seeing one another outside of the school setting. When school is not in session, the core group often goes to the Inner City Development Community Center, which is directed by the Radles, so they can continue to meet.

Together, these women form a support group, helping one another over the bad times as well as sharing the good. One mother, in fact, even though her children no longer attend J.T., still volunteers because she gains emotional support from the other parents. As one put it, "We're all sisters here." Each has found that she is not alone in being concerned about her children but that some of her neighbors feel the same way. Each is learning that she is really contributing to the school and to her children and that she is being listened to and valued. Each is realizing that, if one of her colleagues with little education can develop the skills and confidence needed to get a job, there is a chance that she can do so, as well.

THE TEACHERS

Many of the teachers were skeptical at first about having parents help in the classroom. Over the years, some had had contact only with the parents of troublemakers or with parents who themselves

were aggressive and demanding. Others, however, acknowledged a real need for a helping hand and were willing to give a volunteer a try. Now a number of teachers are enthusiastic about the program and eager to explain why.

Ms. Abrigo, who taught in schools throughout the United States and abroad while her husband was in military service, has been a kindergarten teacher at J.T. for three years. She has 20 youngsters in her class and no assistant teacher.

Noting that the school district has put few resources into early childhood education, she has nothing but praise for the volunteer program. "Parent volunteers make an amazing difference," she says. "They are the extra hands, extra feet. In kindergarten you need many visuals—posters, bulletin boards, coloring. They make these visual materials; they take the load, the stress, off of me." According to Ms. Abrigo, most of the women who have helped her are particular about their work and take pride in it. Some need more training than others, but generally they are artistic, and she values their ideas. "I often ask their opinions," she says, "about how something would look best. When I don't have to worry about bulletin boards and making the room attractive, I can concentrate on teaching."

She sees the same volunteer mothers over time. "Some of the parents drop out when they see how much work is involved. The ladies who stick it out realize how much they are needed." Another positive aspect is that "the kids feel the school is safer and friendlier when their mothers are here. I use that. I'll say, 'If you don't behave, Mommy is just down the hall.' It makes a difference in discipline, in behavior." Ms. Abrigo also finds that being in the school on a regular basis helps parents get a real picture of how their children interact with others. She is not familiar with other School of the Future programs at J.T.—"there is just no time"—but as far as the parents go, "They make a big contribution. The ladies use their talents in a positive way."

Ms. Sánchez is a second grade teacher who has taught for 22 years

around the state and is in her sixth year at J.T. She hesitated at first about using a volunteer but agreed to give it a try, and when she got one she was so impressed that she can't say enough about her. Her first volunteer helped for two years, then returned to school herself. "At first I had her observe," she explained. "Then I asked her to help with reading—not teach reading but reinforce the lesson." The volunteer came daily and Ms. Sánchez came to rely on her to help correct papers and give feedback with student evaluations, as well.

The volunteer she had last year had a child in her class. "He was an active youngster and behind in his work. The mother helped her little boy and also helped with paperwork. Being there gave her a chance to see how her child behaved in school and to work with the teacher to improve his behavior and his skills. And now," she added, "in part as a result of that extra help, he's a good student." This year, a father is serving as her volunteer. She realizes that she will have to take extra time to train him to carry out classroom tasks, but she has found that through her class he is improving his own reading skills, which in turn will enable him to be more helpful to his children.

One drawback to parent volunteers, from Ms. Sánchez' viewpoint, is that one has to tell parents several times how to do something. She also thinks parents should be helped to view the teachers more positively and less critically. On the positive side, she thinks that parents view teachers more favorably after working in a classroom, where they see all the skills in addition to education—nurse, social worker, disciplinarian, caregiver—that an elementary-school teacher needs.

Ms. Martinez-Mireles has spent her entire 11-year career at J.T. A third-grade teacher, she says, "I wish I were an octopus. Parents are my extra arms." Explaining that volunteers help with decorations, instructional posters, and making copies of teaching materials, she commented that many are quite talented. "They free me from having to cut, color, and paste," she commented, "so I can get to meaningful instruction. Also, I can tell them about their kids." Ms. Martinez-Mireles finds that children are proud if their mothers volunteer, and she likes the fact that a parent can take over the class for

a short period of time, if necessary. "Last year I needed a parent helper, but they were all taken. I asked the kids to ask their parents if they would like to work in my classroom. I want parents here; their assistance is helpful."

Other School of the Future programs also are helpful, according to this third-grade teacher. Pointing out that "These people don't have money for counseling so they deal with problems their own ways, " she has been able to get children into counseling when it was necessary. "Their needs and their problems are deep," she notes, "and all of these programs help."

In addition to classes, the school health clinic is another work site for volunteers. Here, the nurse has parents help with filing, bring children from classrooms to the clinic for medication, and soothe youngsters who have fallen on the playground or are not feeling well. "You have to be careful about what you have them do," she points out. "Confidentiality is needed, so we can't permit volunteers to look through records." Volunteers also work in the School of the Future office where they run errands, answer phones when the secretary is out of the office, do simple paper work, and enter data on the computer.

Although parent volunteerism on the whole is a positive effort, it also has some drawbacks. For one thing, parents who have had little experience in a work or school situation not only may not know how to handle specific tasks but also may be unfamiliar with expected behavior, or etiquette, in a public setting. How an adult should behave in the classroom is something that can be learned, but it takes time. Some teachers are unable or unwilling to provide the required training, others complain that training time may be wasted because of the turnover in volunteers. A few teachers are somewhat threatened by having a parent in the classroom; others are concerned only if the volunteer has a child in the class. On the one hand, this can lead to competition between the parent and teacher; on the other hand, enabling a parent to view his child in a school setting can be beneficial for both parent and child.

PROGRAM OUTCOME

The Parent Volunteer Program has flourished. The first year, 26 parents served as volunteers. Hours of service per person ranged from 2 to 148, with 21 parents giving from 2 to 50 hours each and five giving more than 50 hours apiece.

Some 50 volunteers signed up in 1991, 53 in 1992, and an average of 20 to 30 attended the monthly workshops each year on topics of interest. In time, a core of about 20 parents emerged who were dedicated to the program and spent many hours involved in school activities. Through phone calls and personal contacts, these parents encouraged their friends and neighbors to become involved.

Parent volunteer services have increased dramatically since the program began. During the first year, participants gave 800 hours of service; the second year, 3,625 hours; the third year, almost 8,000. In the fourth year—1993-94—the program leveled off, maintaining around 40 active parents who for the second year in a row contributed almost 8,000 hours of volunteer service. Though the numbers differ, the pattern of volunteer hours contributed in 1993-94 was similar to the other years: first quarter - 2,510; second quarter - 2,011; third quarter - 1,583; fourth quarter - 1,473. The decline in hours of service over the course of a school year can be attributed to loss of interest over time as well as to the fact that some volunteers enter the work force or have increased family demands. The dedicated parents who complete a year of service receive formal recognition at the final PTA meeting of the school year.

Individual hours also show an interesting pattern. A look at the first quarter of 1994 shows that while 12 parents volunteered less than 20 hours each, 18 contributed between 21 and 100 hours apiece; 6, from 101 and 200 hours; and 4, more than 200 hours. The average of 67 hours volunteered that quarter doesn't accurately reflect the time that some of these parents helped at J.T. Brackenridge.

According to the SoF coordinator, the volunteer program has helped improve parent relations with teachers. Though originally hesitant, some teachers now request parents for special situations, such as helping a child with braces who needs extra assistance, as well as for general assistance. Teachers do have to be tolerant, however, and accept the parents where they are. They have to understand that most have had limited education, virtually no job training, and are limited in reading ability and English proficiency. They have to recognize that many are ill at ease in a classroom and worried that they will not be able to carry out the assignments they are given. Despite these limitations, however, the problem is not finding teachers who are interested in using volunteers but getting enough parents to commit to the program. Most of the time there are not enough volunteers to fill the requests.

Another program outcome, and one that has been a particular goal of the volunteer director, has been the participants' growth in skills and confidence. This is exemplified not only in the classroom but also in the fact that an estimated 15 to 20 percent of the parents have been hired as substitute teachers by the San Antonio ISD or obtained other paid employment as a result of their increased skills. In the program's first year, for example, a parent who had assisted with data entry in the library obtained a job with the Internal Revenue Service. She credited the volunteer service at J.T. with improving her skills and confidence to the extent that she could become employed. Improved skills and confidence also are apparent in the group as a whole. Initially dependent on the director for carrying out group functions, the parents last year took it upon themselves to conduct the annual orientation for new volunteers. The fact that they wanted to do it as well as had the ability to carry it out indicated how much progress they had made.

A number of parents also have attended English-As-A-Second Language (ESL) and General Educational Development (GED) classes that are conducted at the school two days a week by the Adult Education Services of the Region XX Education Service Center. These are offered to help parents become more proficient in English

as well as obtain a high school equivalency degree so that they will be better able to provide for their families and to serve as role models for their children. About 20 adults take these classes each year; others, because of their limited schooling, need to develop their reading skills before they enroll in GED classes. In 1993-94, two women completed all the tests and received their high school equivalency degrees.

Of benefit to the volunteers and their families has been the exposure to other programs available through the School of the Future project. Through their contact with the project coordinator and school staff, for example, parents learn of counseling and other services that might be helpful for their children. They hear about child therapy and family counseling, available without charge through professionally supervised social work and psychology interns from local universities. They learn that their children are being taught nonviolent ways to resolve problems through Children's Creative Response to Conflict (CCRC), a program that uses student peer mediation to settle disputes. They discover that there is help for their pregnant young neighbors through Hogar, a prenatal and early childhood education and assessment program for families in the J.T. and De Zavala neighborhoods, and for children with developmental delays through the Early Childhood Intervention Program for infants and preschoolers. Through communication with teachers and staff, they can be made aware of any problems their children might have and be guided to the appropriate resources for remediation.

It is too early to tell if the children of volunteers are doing better in school than they were previously or better than their peers whose parents do not participate in the school. These and other issues are being explored through program evaluation. It is apparent, however, that youngsters whose parents are active at J.T. are more aware of services that are available and more likely to take advantage of them.

Parent education sessions continue to attract interest, especially when they deal with personal and family-related subjects. Each year, the parent volunteers suggest a variety of topics before narrowing

the list to those of greatest interest. The first year, after considering everything from budgeting to home safety to understanding dreams, volunteers selected the following topics: discipline and guidance, family communication, dating and relationships, balancing time and family, preparing your child for adolescence, explaining sex to your family, and how to talk with your child's teacher.

How to communicate with teenagers and spouses has remained a major concern. Selected topics in 1993-94 included stress, AIDS, organizing your time, and how to get parents involved, while among the more popular subjects over the years have been "Discipline and Guidance," "Family Communication," "Balancing Work and Family," "You and Your Adolescent," and "Explaining Sex to Your Children." The first session of the school year tends to be well attended. After that, even though volunteers help get the word out through phone calls and personal contact, the number varies considerably, averaging about 15 or 16 in attendance at each meeting.

It should be noted that not all of the program participants are volunteers in the true sense of the word. In addition to those who are recruited through the program, some parents are mandated by the courts to carry out a specific number of hours of community or school service or to obtain GED or other types of training. Furthermore, not all parents work out well as volunteers or find the program to their liking. Of those who sign up in any given year, about half drop out after they find out how much work is involved. A few parents act out aggressively or are difficult to work with. Coordinator Radle has found that it is good to have these aggressive parents in the program because "we can help them work on their aggression, encourage them to treat their children well, and get them counseling if they need it." If necessary, they can also suspend them. However, only one parent has been suspended since the program began, and that was for just one week. "It was a learning experience for the other parents," noted the director.

The Parent Volunteer Program seems to have stabilized in number of participants—about 40 each year—and impact on the school. This

may be a mixed blessing. Although it is good to have dedicated workers, the program goal is to develop a changing group whose members grow and move on. The reality is that the most competent parents, after gaining experience as volunteers or completing a GED, have developed confidence and skills and proceeded to positions in the work force. Those who remain now form a dedicated core group, but as they see their peers move on, they are growing frustrated by their limitations. In recognition of this fact, they are talking about starting a counseling and support group that might help them solve some of their problems and enable them to grow.

Though the teachers and parents are not in accord on all aspects of the program, they do agree that children seem to like and benefit from having their parents volunteer in the school. Contrary to popular belief, this is not limited to the youngest children. One volunteer, who had one daugher at J.T. and one at the middle school, was concerned that her older child was no longer doing well in school. The reason, it turned out, was that "My mom isn't here like she was at J.T., so I thought she didn't care about me." The statement, "Hey, I saw your mom in my class," is a positive one for many children, according to Rod Radle.

A spinoff from the parent group is the Junior Volunteers. The group was created in 1993, the year that J.T. changed to year-round schooling but the middle and high schools remained on a traditional schedule. Recognizing that time hangs heavy for many neighborhood youngsters during the summer, the coordinator suggested to the parents that their teenagers might like to volunteer some of their free time to work at the school. The young people accepted the idea enthusiastically, recruiting some of their friends, as well. As one of the staff said, "They like to come back to J.T. The teachers know them, and they know the teachers." They especially like the idea of returning to their elementary school as assistants rather than students. Now some 20 former J.T. students spend part of their summer vacation working in the classrooms or offices and serving as role models for their younger siblings and neighbors.

LOOKING AHEAD

After four years, the Parent Volunteer Program has become an accepted service at J.T. Brackenridge. Enough parents and teachers participate to enable the program to function well, and students have grown accustomed to seeing parents at school in a positive light. Now that the program is well-established, the volunteer director is gradually shifting responsibility for facilitating the meetings and activities to the SoF secretary. The secretary worked for the school district for several years in the transportation department before coming to J.T., and working with parents is a new experience for her. She is getting to know the parents by greeting them when they come to the office, maintaining work records which are useful for recommendations or letters of reference at some future date, and handling logistics for work schedules and special outings. With guidance from Patti Radle, she is learning to facilitate the biweekly meetings and guide the volunteers in planning and carrying out their activities.

A change in program leadership can make a difference to the participants, but the continued guidance of the School of the Future coordinator should help minimize any disruption. The Parent Volunteer Program, along with the project as a whole, has withstood several changes that have taken place, among them changes in personnel—a new superintendent for the San Antonio ISD and three different principals in the past four years at J.T. Brackenridge—and changes in schedule from traditional semesters to year-round schooling. As Rod Radle has pointed out, "If programs like the School of the Future are to be effective and replicable, they must be able to work within the school system, dealing with events which might not be seen in the private sector."

The School of the Future has shown its ability to work within the San Antonio school system to help improve the lives—and the education—of students who have had the least hope. The Parent Volunteers are showing that they, too, can work within the system to

help make a difference in their own children's education. And as they work, they are continuing to hope and to dream, for by improving their own skills as well as helping their youngsters, they can see greater chances of their dreams coming true.

On the parents' mural in the front hall at J.T., in words highlighted in a mix of bright colors, one parent summed up the aspirations of many when she wrote:

> "My dreams are for my children to finish High School. And go to College. And get good Jobs. And to live Happy Lifes. (sic) My dream for me is to grow old with my Husband."

As they build their confidence and skills as well as help their youngsters improve theirs, these parent volunteers are taking important steps to make their hopes and their dreams come true.

[1]Moles, O.C. (1993) "Collaboration between Schools and Disadvantaged Parents: Obstacles and Openings." In Chavkin, N.F. (Ed.) *Families and Schools in a Pluralistic Society.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.